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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9218
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 004435

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/17/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [BG](#)
SUBJECT: PARTIES INCH CLOSER TO TALKS AS PRE-ELECTION GAMES
CONTINUE

Classified By: Acting P/E Counselor David Renz; reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The opposition Awami League appeared to score a string of victories. The Election Commission retreated from the last of its controversial decisions regarding implementation of the Supreme Court decision on the voter list, and the BDG withdrew two amendment proposals that had generated AL criticism. At the same time both main parties started coming under pressure from the business community to sit down for face-to-face talks, and the BNP attempted to open a back-channel for negotiating with the AL. END SUMMARY

ELECTION COMMISSION FLIP-FLOPS...AGAIN
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¶2. (U) On July 9 the Election Commission (EC) reversed itself and announced that it would go door-to-door to conduct registration to update the voter list. This represented the final retreat for the EC from its controversial stances on how to implement the Supreme Court decision that nullified the new voter list prepared by the EC earlier this year. Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Aziz said that in taking this decision he was bowing to public pressure.

¶3. (U) The EC created a new controversy the same day by announcing that it would not be posting a draft list, but would simply create a final list that could be amended up until the election. This created considerable negative coverage in the media, which accused the CEC of once again acting arbitrarily and ignoring past practice. The CEC defended the decision by saying that there was not sufficient time to post a draft list and have another official corrections period.

AMENDMENT CONTROVERSY TAKES CENTER STAGE
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¶4. (U) The controversies regarding the voter list were momentarily set aside as the opposition Awami League focused its criticism on government moves to pass an amendment to the constitution. The proposed amendment would have extended the deadline required for by-elections for parliamentary seats vacated near the end of a parliament's term from 90 to 180 days. Under current law, although the parliament must be dissolved by late October, by-elections are still required by mid-September to fill the seats of two recently deceased BNP MPs. The amendment would have prevented the need for these by-elections, which according to Law Minister Moudad Ahmed would ease pressure on the EC to organize two by-elections in the midst of trying to update the voter list.

15. (C) In public statements the AL seized on this amendment proposal as "another threat to democracy." At a private dinner for the Ambassador on July 10, AL Presidium Member and MP Suranjit Sengupta told us that through this amendment "the government was trying to stay in office indefinitely" and that this was all "a plot to undermine democracy in Bangladesh." AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil added that the amendment was "undemocratic" and another effort by the BNP to "take more power and manipulate the elections." Under criticism from the media and opposition the BDG withdrew the proposal on July 12.

POSSIBLE BNP-AL TALKS?
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16. (C) Independent MP Anwar Hossain Manju told us that on July 6 he was summoned to a two-hour meeting with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. According to Manju, the PM appealed to him to convince the AL to participate in the coming elections. Manju said that he believed the PM was motivated by concern for the legitimacy of the elections if the AL refused to take part.

17. (C) Manju said that he told the PM that he would speak to the AL back-channel, but that she would also have to take certain measures. He told her that to start with the CEC would have to be replaced. He said that though she defended the CEC she "didn't say no." Manju also said that the PM spoke of her concern that the elections be "free and fair," to which he replied that the best Bangladesh could hope for would be "relatively free and fair" and that everyone knew there were going to be problems.

18. (C) On July 10 Manju secretly met with BNP General

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Secretary Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan at Bhuiyan's request. Bhuiyan

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asked him to convey the BNP's proposal for talks to the AL. Manju conveyed the offer personally to Sheikh Hasina on July 11. On July 12 the AL called Manju to tell him they accepted the dialogue "with reluctance," saying "we have no objections to a dialogue with (Bhuiyan)" but that they were skeptical Bhuiyan had enough authority to make decisions. Manju then took this AL "no objection" back to Bhuiyan, asking that the two sides formalize the offer by making it public.

19. (C) At the same time that these secret meetings were taking place, business leaders were also appealing to the BNP and AL to sit down and talk. Officials from several business organizations, including the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) met with both Jalil and Bhuiyan, asking them to sit down to talks to resolve the political impasse, adding that the business community expected a "fair and acceptable election." Bhuiyan stated after his meeting with the leaders on July 13 that he was open to such a dialogue "if the proposal comes from the Awami League."

110. (C) Manju told us later that he did not understand why Bhuiyan was insisting the proposal come from the AL. "He had told me he would consult the Prime Minister with replies from the AL," Manju told us. Manju said that he was now stepping down as "discreet negotiator" though he was prepared to resume the role if there were any further developments.

111. (U) Now that word of the discussions have leaked out, the parties have returned to the posturing that characterized earlier attempts to negotiate reforms. Business groups remain active in trying to bring the two parties together, and may unilaterally invite both parties to meet at a specific time and place, hoping neither will want to be a no-show.

COMMENT

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¶12. (C) Most of these developments simply reflect the continued positioning and counter-positioning of the two main parties. However, with the EC in full retreat from its original plans on how to implement the Supreme Court decision for the new voter list, and with the BDG withdrawing its proposed amendment, the AL appears to have scored a couple of minor victories at the BNP's expense.

¶13. (C) The fact that the PM herself requested a back-channel to the AL indicates the seriousness of her concern about a potential AL boycott. By finally agreeing to sit down one-on-one with the AL, the BNP has the most to lose since this will be viewed as an abandonment of its earlier insistence on no talks without the participation of its coalition partners. For the AL's part, its main weapon to date has been the threat of a boycott. Ironically, the AL's recent, relatively minor victories could serve to demonstrate the responsiveness of the system to the party's concerns and thus undermine the justification for a boycott. With its boycott threat starting to look hollow, the AL may need to start focusing on what its bottom line will be with regard to electoral and caretaker government reform.

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